

## CONCEPT 8: DELTA BLUES COMMEMORATIVE AREA

### GOAL

The goal of this concept, like concepts 2 and 3, is to supply a base of information for implementation of section 1104 of the Delta Initiatives legislation which calls for recommendations for establishing a Delta music program with heavy emphasis on the blues. A commemorative area configuration would utilize the existing system of state welcome centers to introduce visitors to the history of the blues and would direct them to sites/resources important to the development of the blues. This would enable visitors and residents to better understand the connections between the landscape, the culture of the Delta, and most importantly, why the blues originated in the Delta.

### IMPORTANCE/SIGNIFICANCE

Often perceived as flat and monotonous, the Delta is a place of powerful, fickle rivers that have shaped both the area's physical environment and its cultures. Over time, they have created a mosaic of landscapes and rich soil capable of nurturing majestic forests and huge harvests of cotton and other agricultural products. Yet the Delta remains a paradox: a land of natural wealth harboring poverty. It is a strongly separate place from the rest of America. In few other areas have the tensions characteristic of Southern society been more obvious between people and the natural world, between white and black people, between rich and poor.

To understand the blues, one must understand the Delta, must feel the Delta's oppressive heat, see the cotton fields, and grasp the poverty. The stimulating physical environment of storms, floods, hurricanes, extreme heat, and drought, bringing destruction, change, and renewal, served as a catalyst to the imagination and the development of the blues. People who sang and played the blues were tenant farmers and sharecroppers, not plantation owners.

The blues were developed by people engaged in struggle, infused with spirit and speaking in dialect. Rooted in African music, the blues were songs of hope, born out of work and out of

sorrow: from rhythmic work chants of railroad gangs and cotton pickers; from spirituals; from slave songs; and from the haunting and lyrical field hollers. It is said that misery produces creativity and resiliency. The blues tells stories of frustrated love, broken homes, and other miseries of displaced people. It is considered one of the most important root sources of modern popular music.

The Delta is the birthplace of blues artists such as Henry Sloan, Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, Tommy Johnson, Sonny Boy Williamson, Eddie "Son" House, Mississippi John Hurt, John Lee Hooker, "Big Bill" Broonzy, Muddy Waters, Albert King, and B.B. King to name just a few. These artists and many others who developed their unique style of Delta blues have influenced today's blues artists and brought a deeper appreciation of the blue's influence on modern music.

### RESOURCES

Delta blues is still being performed at clubs and juke joints around the Delta. Visitors can also glimpse the landscape and imagine the conditions that gave rise to the blues by traveling U.S. Highway 61 past the cotton fields and small towns along the way. Remnants of the early blues may be found in recordings available at music stores and at various blues archives; at cultural centers that interpret the blues such as the Delta Blues Museum in Clarksdale, Mississippi and the Delta Cultural Center in Helena, Arkansas; plantations such as Dockery Farms where the blues began; various communities which were the birthplaces of famous blues musicians, sites where they played, cemeteries where they are buried, commemorative markers, and other sites of interest; blues festivals; and the levees, porches, prisons, highways, byways, and pathways that gave birth to the blues.

## **RESOURCES**

### **State Welcome Centers**

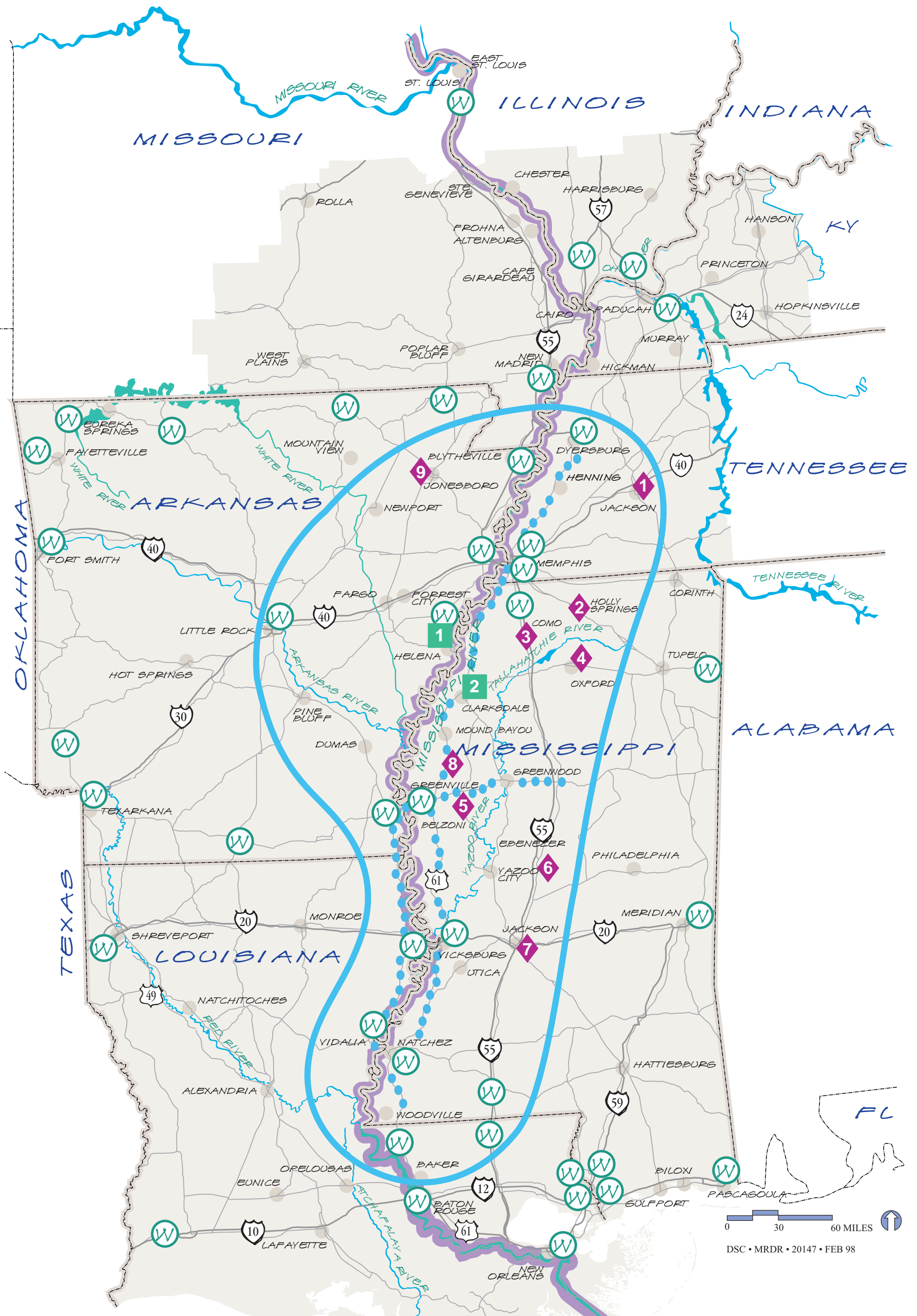
### **Delta Cultural/Interpretive Centers**

1. Delta Cultural Center (Helena, Arkansas)
2. Delta Blues Museum (Clarksdale, Mississippi)

### **Other Sites of Interest**

Marked gravesites, railroad crossings (where the “Southern meets the Dog”), the Mississippi River levee system, various plantations (Dockery Farms), and “juke joints” are all sites where the blues began and developed into its own style. Highway 61, called the “Blues Highway” — multiple sites of interest documenting the history of the blues. The resources below represent museums and resources are also points of interests for learning more or listening to the blues.

1. Lane College (Jackson, Tennessee)
2. Rust College (Holly Springs, Mississippi)
3. Como, Mississippi
4. Center for the Study of Southern Culture; Blues Archives, University of Mississippi (Oxford, Mississippi)
5. Morgan City, Mississippi
6. Ebenezer, Mississippi
7. Jackson, Mississippi
8. Arkansas State University, Delta Blues symposium (Jonesboro, Arkansas)



-  STATE WELCOME CENTERS
-  -  DELTA INTERPRETIVE/ CULTURAL CENTERS
-  TOUR ROUTES (INCLUDES NUMEROUS SITES)
-  -  OTHER SITES OF INTEREST (NOT ALONG BLUES TOUR ROUTE)

Lower Mississippi  
Delta Region  
HERITAGE STUDY

CONCEPT 8  
DELTA BLUES  
COMMEMORATIVE AREA